

Managing a Web-Based University in Thailand

Boonmark Sirinaovakul, Ph.D.

Associate Professor and Assistant President
RSU Cyber University at Rangsit University, Thailand
Dr_boonmark@hotmail.com, www.rsu-cyberu.com

Abstract

At present, there are several normal universities operating the internet based distance learning education in Thailand. Three of them are big private universities and one government sponsored, Thai Cyber University. The trend of the cyber education in Thailand is promising. Anyway, the need for the quality cyber education is compulsory. The good quality of cyber education will contribute greatly to the country as a whole.

This paper describes the first Thai web based university, RSU Cyber University, that offers degrees online in the management of quality operations system perspective. The Porter competitive advantage model is applied to describe our quality operations in thriving for the world class standards. The competitive benchmarking is being used. The quality system currently practiced in focusing on the student service for the continuous improvements is operating quite well. Since the year 2006 that we established the RSU Cyber University, we had the product of our graduates in Master of Art in Leadership and Bachelor of Law. The Master of Science program in Information Technology Management is operating quite well and very popular among professionals in businesses and industries.

1. Introduction

There is a great need for quality education in Thailand. Especially, the professional people who work in a variety of sectors, such as, state enterprises, business and industries. These professional people are busy with their targeted works and find no time to pay

attention to further their study. Some of them live far away from the university. This makes the opportunities for continuing their education rarely meet. However, they need quality education for their skills improvement and need higher degrees for career progression.

Cyber University or the internet-based distance education, suitably serves the aforementioned purpose of Thai education. The idea of a cyber university is to integrate advanced technology with the business system in order to add value to a normal university so that it can teach and learn via internet. It is suitable for the students who need flexible time schedule to earn their degrees or non-degrees. This is so called "anybody can learn anytime and anywhere" concept.

Currently, there have been three private universities and one government sponsored, Thai Cyber University, offering degrees online via web based distance learning in Thailand. RSU Cyber University, at Rangsit University, was founded right after the Ministry of Education announced its regulations for a university to operate the internet-based distance learning education system in Thailand in 2006.

Rangsit University is a comprehensive private university offering degrees ranging from medical sciences, engineering, aviation technology, information technology, architecture, business administration, mass communication, to liberal arts with the total students of more than 20,000 including the international (English teaching) college. It offers 70 bachelor, 27 master, and 5 doctoral programs in various fields.

RSU Cyber University is the first Thai web based university offering degrees on

line in graduate and undergraduate programs. Currently, it is the largest online university in Thailand.

This paper describes the management of Thai web based university in achieving excellent performance in a quality system perspective. The Porter's competitive model has been used to describe the system with emphasis on creating value added to the student focused strategy.

We found that our students are those who work in the businesses, industries, hospitals, state enterprises, Parliament of Thailand, and local administration organization. Even their busy daily work, we make them happily enjoy their free time study via web based education, complementary with the value added learning activity, scheduled meeting, to work on their assignments in the real world place through education tour. Currently, we are operating three active programs, namely: 1) Master of Art in Leadership, 2) Master of Science in Information technology management, and 3) Bachelor of Law, and professional certificates in several disciplines.

2. Managing a Business

In struggling to set up the new cyber university in offering degrees online, there exist the confusing notion that "Is it the management of technology?" or "Is it the management of business?" in operating a cyber university. Especially, the high investment costs of advanced technology in the beginning phase, such as, the learning management system (LMS) and the data and information center equipments and facility for e-learning system. The business issues of a cyber university involve the organization initiation and the set up of procedural business process system to manage and operate the RSU Cyber University. It also includes the initiative estimate of budgeting expense, and the amount of students recruited, and also the management of the financial cash flow to cover the viably feasible finance.

In dealing with the high technology cost issues in the beginning stage, we decided to outsource the technology operations service and make the business partnership with the telecommunication company. These services include the leasing of the software package of the learning management system (LMS), the information and data center facility, and the construction of the electronic courses. This aims to keep the lower investment of technology costs, and we can focus our attention to operating the cyber business successfully. In addition, we have the advantage of controlling our service quality by setting up the service level agreement with the students by outsourcing this technology service.

The alignment of business operations and technology system was implemented in all RSU Cyber University operations including marketing and advertising, student recruitment, registration, teaching operations, methodology procedure, academic support service, and financial plan. The quality is our main focused strategy in achieving the cyber education for performance excellence. The quality system perspective for RSU Cyber University is then proposed to streamline all the connected operation units and make the measurement and analysis feedback loop to improve all the relevant activities and operations.

RSU Cyber University, as a strategic business unit of Rangsit University, has aligned its vision, mission and strategies with the Rangsit University's master plan for the years 2007 to 2011 and the president's vision in 2005. In March 2005, the president developed the road map to excellence vision. The president's vision is subdivided into the 4 strategic components as follows: 1) Competitiveness, 2) E-University, 3) Internationalization, and 4) Certification.

RSU Cyber University was an innovative product of the E-University strategy development. Its objectives are in alignment with all the above strategies, especially the competitiveness which means "quality". The president has set the competitiveness criteria

as in the followings: 1) uniqueness and distinction, 2) quality education, 3) quality graduate, and 4) trustworthiness and reputation.

The missions of RSU Cyber University are three folds as follows: 1) It is to provide an alternative opportunity for the Thai students worldwide to access the quality education via internet based distance education system. This education must be equipped with them the professional skills that must enhance their career development and career progression needs. 2) It is to produce the constructivist electronic courses in a web based service that meet the world class standard and it must satisfy the learners' needs. 3) It is a sustainable life long learning organization that is suitable to the continuing education students anytime and anywhere.

In studying the cyber market in Thailand, we found that the professional people who work in the businesses and industries are our main market niche. These people really want to pursue the higher degrees for their career progression but they can not manage their time schedule to attend the formal learning classes. In addition, many of them live and work distantly from the university so that it is difficult for them to access and reach a formal learning classroom. This type of students prefers to study via cyber education system.

At present, the RSU Cyber University has offered three active degrees online programs as mentioned above and we are considering to offer more online programs, such as, Master of Business Administration and the Ph.D. in the coming academic year.

3. Quality System Perspective for RSU Cyber University

In a recent statement made by the president of Rangsit University, Dr. Arthit Urairat, in a daily newspaper, he has stressed strictly about the quality of Thai education, as quoted that "If I were to name three things about Thai education, I would say that they are only quality, quality, and quality. Other

thing else, it would kill ourselves and it would kill our country finally".

The RSU Cyber University, as a business system, is viewed in a quality system perspective by applying the Porter's competitive model, as in the following Figure 1.

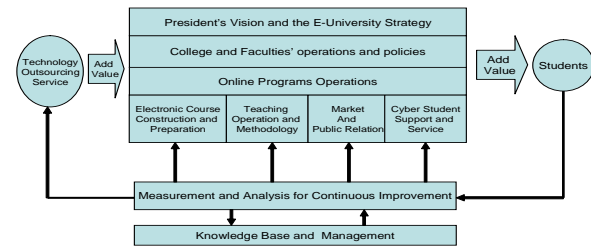


Figure 1. The quality system perspective for RSU Cyber University

3.1 Technology Outsourcing Service

The initial investment of technology for the cyber university infrastructure is relatively prohibitive. The initial technology costs include the construction of the learning management system or the LMS, the information and data center equipments and facility, and the reliable high speed internet network for operations. Another difficulty is to provide the reliable and professional service to construct the electronic courses in order to match up with the online programs which is embarked at the earliest planned schedule, coupled with the professional service expected by the students after the embarkation of the system, that is, the reliable system maintenance and operations. All of these operations must be in a way to satisfy the registered students till their graduation.

In coping with the above environments, we decided to outsource the technology service in order to be able to manage and dictate our service requirement levels. We choose the business technology partner and lease the LMS and the information and data center and facility. The construction of the electronic courses are also outsourced so that we can easily manage and control the quality of the output of the course content up to the world class standards. Then, we have plenty more time in setting up our business technology system to operations.

By outsourcing the technology service, we have some advantage of lower initial investment cost by sharing the risk with the business technology partner during the introductory stage. Some disadvantage is the contract term agreement which is up to the growth estimation of our cyber education business.

3.2 The University Support Units for RSU Cyber University

The president has put the full support to the RSU Cyber University as a critical strategic business unit. All the college and faculties that offered the online degree programs has the full responsibility to support and assist the program administration to success. The college and faculties take responsibility in preparing the budget for teaching operations and the value added activities complementary to the students in learning. The college and faculties also set the inductive environment for teaching methodology innovations so that the students can happily learn and graduate at the minimum time requirements. The complementary materials such as, printing books, VCD, and tape records to support the self learning are also produced to satisfy the students' needs.

RSU Cyber University directs the general administration including finance and the budget control, marketing and adverting, student service support, general policies, and the future cyber businesses.

3.3 Measurement and Analysis for Continuous Improvement

RSU Cyber University monitors and controls the effective operations in the online programs by developing the key metrics and rational ratios in a report form so that these metrics and ratios can be used to analyze the effectiveness and make improvements. These metrics and ratios used reflect the financial and non-financial rewards.

Measurement is done and used to monitored the student satisfaction along the process from the market survey, student recruitment, registration, teaching and

learning operations, electronic course preparation and construction, student service support, till graduation process and career progression. All of the measured elements are used to analyze the successes and failures of the operations and they are used to set the future trends of the cyber education business.

All of the measurement and analysis efforts are to assure the quality service of the cyber education business at the competitive performance excellence and meeting the world class standards. The competitive benchmarking with the online programs in the USA and other Asian countries are always measured, monitored, and analyzed.

The concluding remarks of successes and failures of the cyber operations are presented quarterly to the RSU Cyber University executive board meeting headed by the president in order to get the new directions for future operations. The acquired knowledge is then documented in the knowledge data base for predicting the future cyber business.

4. Managing Student Focused Service

The registered students are the most important asset for the RSU Cyber University. The management of our service to serve the students are our main concern. As mentioned in the above, the student support service is monitored and measured along the connected operation process starting from the market survey, student recruitment and registration, teaching and learning operations, electronic course construction and preparation, methodology innovations, till graduation process and career progression..

The marketing activities include advertising and the field activities to recruit the students for registration. In addition, the web based market survey was constructed to attract the potential students and make the market segmentation. In the market segmentation study, it tells our niche market of potential students who are the salary paid

people or the professionals who work in the businesses and industries. They need degrees for their career progression but they can not find the fixed scheduled time table to attend the formal classroom.

The teaching and learning activities are reported via web. The content expert and teaching assistants work closely together in the interactive communication through any high technology device, such as, computer notebook, PDA, normal telephone, the iPhone, the Blackberry, and so on. The frequency and time length of interactive communication are reported monthly for teaching professors so that they can find the ways to improve the teaching process and methodology. The teaching follow up by the professors and student support service team are frequently conducted to get the students to study, learn and graduate at the scheduled time table.

The complaints and suggestions are regularly received as a feedback to the responsible person to take care. This process is to ensure the satisfaction obtained by the students.

The RSU Cyber University student alumni is formed and organized in order to be able to track their career progression and reported.

The regulations and policies are made in the RSU Cyber University executive boards meeting.

5. Findings

Most of the students are happy with the RSU Cyber University in our learning management system because they have freedom in studying and learning anytime and any where at their most convenience. They have more interest and more concentration in learning. They have more fun. In a cyber social network without regular normal class group meeting, students dare to express their view and put comments via electronic devices because it is the simultaneous communication between the two persons only, no fear and no lose face.

In a monthly gathering activity organized by the teaching professor complement to the cyber education communication, the professor can draw a larger group of students than a normal class when tutoring because they are actively eager to see and meet the professor and their friends that they used to talk in a cyber network. They are more active in participating the face to face tutoring group meeting. This is because they rarely meet and get close together. It is a better atmosphere to learn and do their due assignments submitted to the professor for grading.

In general, the cyber students satisfy the cyber education.

6. Future of Thai Cyber Education

We believe that there is a good trend for the cyber education growth in Thailand. Quality is the key to success. The cyber education will contribute greatly to the Thai education in the near future. The Thai Government has to seriously get attention to make the proper policies for the country's ICT infrastructure in contributing benefits to the Thai people who need the quality cyber education all over the country and abroad

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